

# The Museum of Modern Art

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NO. 32  
FOR RELEASE:  
APRIL 9, 1974

Press Preview;  
April 8, 11am-4pm

## GERALD MURPHY AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The six surviving paintings by the American artist, Gerald Murphy (1888-1964), will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from April 9 through May 19. In addition, a drawing and a collage for Murphy's ballet, "Within the Quota," for which Cole Porter composed the music, will be shown. William Rubin, Director of the Painting and Sculpture Department, and Sara Mazo, Assistant Curator, co-directed the exhibition. The accompanying catalogue\* was written by Mr. Rubin with the collaboration of Carolyn Lanchner, Assistant Curator.

Murphy has largely been remembered for his friendships with such figures as Stravinsky, Picasso, Léger, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald (who is supposed to have used Murphy as the model for Dick Diver in Tender Is the Night), and through Calvin Tomkins' biography Living Well Is the Best Revenge. But, during the short period he worked actively as an artist -- 1922 to 1929 -- he produced a small, exquisite and, in certain respects, remarkably prophetic body of work.

He exhibited annually in the Salon des Indépendants from 1923 to 1926 where his work was singled out and acclaimed by contemporary critics. But as Rubin observes, "Since Murphy had exhibited only in Paris in the twenties and then returned to live in America, references to his work disappeared from French accounts of modern art. By the same token, since he had studied and worked only abroad, he was unknown to the American Precisionist painters and their admirers, who were intrinsically closest to his art."

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\* THE PAINTINGS OF GERALD MURPHY by William Rubin with the collaboration of Carolyn Lanchner. Foreword by Archibald MacLeish. 48 pages, 38 black-and-white illustrations, 4-color cover. \$2.95 paperbound. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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The six paintings in the show are: Razor, 1924, (Dallas Museum of Fine Arts); Watch, 1924-25, (Dallas Museum of Fine Arts); Doves, 1925, (Mr. and Mrs. William M. Donnelly); Library, 1926-27, (Mr. and Mrs. William M. Donnelly); Cocktail, 1927, (Mrs. Philip Barry); and Wasp and Pear, 1929, acquired by The Museum of Modern Art just before Murphy's death in 1964 as a gift from his friend Archibald MacLeish. Photographs of lost paintings and other documentary material are also included.

Murphy's work was introduced to the American public in 1960 in an exhibition organized by the late Douglas MacAgy for the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts, where five of the six paintings were shown in an exhibition called "American Genius in Review."

The Murphys moved to Paris in 1921. By 1924 they were spending most of their time at a home they had purchased and christened "Villa America" near Antibes on the then unspoiled Riviera. But the idyllic existence they had created for themselves there was destroyed by a series of personal tragedies that began in 1929 with the grave illness of their younger son Patrick. Murphy gave up painting abruptly and finally and in 1934 the family returned to America where Murphy resumed his role as head of Mark Cross. Patrick's death in 1937 was preceded by the sudden and unexpected death of the Murphys' other son Baoth in 1935. Murphy's paintings were left in the Villa America until after World War II.

On the basis of new research Mr. Rubin asserts that Murphy's production was not ten, but unquestionably 12, almost certainly 14 paintings. Watch (1924-25) is "the most complex and, for me, best painting," he says, "... flat, totally centralized in design, ... [it] contains no play of light -- and, hence, no modeling

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or shading.... all vestiges of perspective are eliminated and the corners of the composition are brought right up to the surface.... While the frontality, simple geometricity, and precise impersonal execution of [Watch and Razor] can be found in many 'iconic' still lifes of twenties Cubism, these same stylistic properties are also to be found in American naïf art, which was one of Murphy's great passions.... Indeed, I would suggest that the particular appeal of Razor and Watch -- as against what Murphy painted before and after -- lies in the precise (and no doubt unconsciously effected) stylistic equilibrium between the naïveté of American primitivism and the sophistication of French Cubism, two sources that surprisingly shared more common ground than one would think. (Or perhaps not surprisingly, given the relation of the Douanier Rousseau to Cubism.)"

The balance of naïveté and sophistication that characterizes Razor and Watch dips in favor of sophistication in Doves (1925) and Library (1926-27) which contain architectural motifs and softer colors.

In Cocktail (1927) the rigorous geometry manifest in Library is sustained. Wasp and Pear (1929) which Murphy considered probably the best of his pictures, was his last. "Though it lacks the impact of the more declarative Razor and Watch, it equally if not more rewards sustained perusal," Mr. Rubin notes. While the framing devices and geometrical ground extend Murphy's explorations in Cocktail and Portrait (lost), the insect and fruit have more freely invented arabesqued silhouettes, for which the background acts rather as a foil. "The progression through a shallow space from the rear planes where the insect's comb is located to the bulging surface of the pear in the center of the field is more consistent and more controlled than in previous works, and indicates

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a surer grasp of Cubism."

The exhibition also includes a drawing and a collage for "Within the Quota" which was produced by Les Ballets Suédois and had its premiere October 25, 1923, as a curtain raiser to a ballet for which Léger did costumes and decor. Murphy's backdrop is a giant parody of the front page of a sensationalist newspaper with the headline "Unknown Banker Buys Atlantic."

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Catalogue, photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7501; 956-7504.  
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